

Mayor's Education Task Force

December 4, 2017 Meeting

Chicopee Public Library Community Room

6:30PM

Minutes

Chairman Mruk called the meeting to order at 6:30PM.

Item 1: Introduction of members

- Mayor Kos thanked everyone for coming. He explained that the purpose of the task force is to review the School Department's budget and to propose ways that the department can provide the best services for students in the system within the means of the district's current budget. The committee will present its findings after its final meeting at the end of January.
- The Mayor explained the composition of the committee: nine (9) voting members with John Mruk serving as chair and several ad hoc members who have expressed an interest in having a voice about the direction of education in the city.
- The Mayor then introduced the nine voting members of the committee.
 - A roll call was not taken. Present were: Mruk, Bouchie, Clark, Hurley, LaPerle, McAuliffe, Reid, and Roy. Absent: Brooks.

Item 3: Select a secretary (This item was taken out of order for record keeping purposes.)

- Chairman Mruk asked for a volunteer to serve as the group's secretary. Ms. Hurley volunteered to do so.

Item 2: Discussion of future meeting dates and times

- Tentative future meeting dates and locations are as follows:
 - Tuesday, December 12th in the Community Room of the Main Library
 - Thursday, December 21st in the Community room of the Main Library
 - Monday, January 8th in the City Council Chambers
 - Wednesday, January 17th /Thursday, January 18th (TBD) in the Council Chambers
 - Monday, January 22nd in the Council Chambers
 - Monday, January 29th in the Council Chambers
- Meetings will begin at 6:30PM unless otherwise posted.
- Meeting dates are subject to change.
- Meetings may be added if necessary.
- Meetings will be posted as required by the Open Meeting Law.

Item 4: Discuss the function of the committee

- Chairman Mruk addressed the charge of the Committee as outlined by Mayor Kos.
- The committee will review the School Department budget to make recommendations as to how to most effectively use its \$90M budget.

Item 5: Initial ideas

- Chariman Mruk began this portion of the meeting by identifying a number of documents provided by the School Department for this meeting. Those documents are as follows:
 - A list of consultants currently contracted with the School Department.
 - A list of School Department administrators (excluding principals, vice-principals, and academic department heads).
 - Job descriptions for the above-referenced administrators.
 - Special Education Data.
 - School Department itemized budget.
- Mruk opened the floor for initial thoughts from the committee and from the ad hoc members.
- John Miarecki, School Business Manager, was introduced to the room as he will be responsible for responding to most of the group's requests.
- Mr. McAuliffe asked for a cost per student breakdown for incoming students from Puerto Rico.
- Ms. Roy's initial concern is that in her preparing for this meeting she found that little information is readily available on-line. She found detailed, easy-to-use budget information from several communities but no from Chicopee.
- Mr. LaPerle expressed concern that the budget itself is vague. The salary line items are a lump sum without telling how many people are working out of that line item.
- Ms. Hurley said that the City budget, as she remembers it, specifies how many employees each line item pays for and how many of those positions are filled at the time the budget is written. She further suggests that the lack of available information both on-line and in the budget document itself could reveal a transparency problem.
- Mr. Clark's thought is that projection matters. The recurring issues the School Department is experiencing could be helped with projections.
- Mr. LaPerle commented that projecting with flawed data doesn't help.
- Ms. Hurley commented that four years ago she and Mr. Mruk participated in an exercise similar to this as part of Mayor Kos' Transition Team. She further expressed concern that because several of the team's recommendations have never been implemented, this exercise was going to be one that would likewise go nowhere.
- Mr. McAuliffe questions the possibility of our getting the Transition Team report.
- Mr. Mruk recognized School Committee member Mr. Pise who said that he has been on the budget committee for many years and that they are not hiding things. We have to understand how funds work: the School Department budget can't be put together without state funding. He advised that when looking at consultants the committee needs to pay attention to the source of funds. Grant funded positions have very specific purposes. He continued to explain that the DESE site offers a comparison of districts which might be helpful. The district hires more paraprofessionals than many districts as a way to help teachers because class sizes tend to be large.
- Mr. McAuliffe said that the district was \$3-4M in the red last year. This is the time for the City to decide what its philosophical mission as a district is.
- Mr. LaPerle suggested that he'd like to "peel the onion" of that \$3-4M. Who found it? When? How did it happen? Why?
- Mr. Miarecki offered that one big reason for the shortfall was medical insurance.

- A member of the audience (did not introduce herself) asked the committee about Medicaid reimbursement. She asked why all the money doesn't go back to the schools. Mr. McAuliffe said that the City administers so the City gets the money. Ms. Hurley explained that many years ago during his first administration Mayor Kos made an agreement with the City and the school would split the reimbursements. The audience member continued to argue her point, but with no clear answers, Ms. Hurley suggested that the Committee would ask the Mayor's Office for the formula used to determine who gets what and it would be presented to the group at a future meeting.
- Mr. Pise said that the driving factor in education funding is poverty. The City has to fund schools based upon a formula. He suggested inviting someone from the School Department to a future meeting to explain the budget process.
- Mr. McAuliffe said the Chicopee spends the minimum required net school spending amount that they are required by the state. He said it looks like more because of the city's contribution.
- Chairman Mruk recognized School Committee member Mary Beth Pniak-Costello.
- Ms. Pniak-Costello suggests selecting a secretary for the group. Ms. Hurley tells her she will serve as the secretary. Ms. Pniak-Costello said that a comparison of surrounding communities' net school spending would be helpful. She suggests Northampton, Westfield, etc. Ms. Hurley concurred with the suggestion added Springfield and Holyoke and other cities that more closely resemble the demographics of Chicopee than Northampton does. She reminded those in attendance that the Chicopee School district is not the same one she attended or the same as those Mr. Mruk taught in.
- Mr. McAuliffe asked MR. Miarecki for the net school spending numbers for all communities in Western Mass and the gateway cities.
- Mr. Clark expressed concerns that specifics of the budget are not here. He said that there have to be other ways to do a budget than the way we do it in Chicopee. He shared that a friend of his had to attend several days of budget meetings in Ludlow, and it doesn't seem a public process like that happens in Chicopee.
- Mr. LaPerle concurred. In private industry it's called benchmarking, looking at best practices.
- Mr. McAuliffe suggested the committee may want to invite City Auditor Sharyn Riley to a future meeting to explain the City's role in the School Department's budgeting process.
- Chariman Mruk asked if we should do that at the second meeting or the third. Ms. Hurley said that she would like to have time to review the documents presented to the committee first. Perhaps the next meeting could be for developing questions and the third meeting could be for asking those questions of invitees.
- Mr. Pise added that the district does not charge students to play sports and has been committed to neighborhood schools.
- Mr. McAuliffe said that just because we've always done it doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.
- Mr. Clark reiterated the importance of projections.
- Ms. Pniak-Costello suggested involving the Planning Department in any discussions of projections. They should have a sense of numbers the committee may need.
- Mr. Pise informed the committee about the drain charter schools are on the city. The School Department still has to pay for city residents who are students at charter schools. He expressed fear over the upcoming move of Pope St. Francis School because it will be an attractive building to someone looking to open a charter school.
- Ms. Hurley thanks Ms. Pniak-Costello, Mr. Pise, and others invested in the schools for showing up. She reassured them that the purpose of this committee is not to attack them or their work but to support it and to find ways to make our schools better for the students in them.

- Mr. Mruk thank everyone for coming.
- Ms. Hurley made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Clark seconded.
- Meeting adjourned at 7:42PM.